

REPORT

EVALUATION OF THE IMPLEMENTATION OF THE MANAGEMENT AGREEMENT 2021-2025

INSTITUTE OF DEVELOPMENT POLICY AND MANAGEMENT (IOB)
ANTWERP

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INTRODUCTION

The Flemish Community has entered into a management agreement with the Institute of Development Policy and Management (IOB) for the period 2021–2025. As part of this agreement, its implementation will be evaluated at the end of the cycle by a committee appointed by the minister. This committee was established in April 2024 and consists of:

- Thea Hilhorst, Erasmus University (chair)
- Bart van de Putte, Universiteit Gent
- Kristof Sampers, Inspection of Finances
- Jean Bossuyt, European Centre for Development Policy Management (secretary)

The task of this committee was to assess whether IOB complies with the terms and obligations of the management agreement and to evaluate what the agreement has yielded for the Institute. In particular, the Committee was asked to report on the implementation of the various components of the management agreement.

In early June 2024, the committee received IOB's Self-Evaluation Report. The review took place on 14 June 2024, providing the committee with the opportunity to hold structured discussions with representatives from all segments of IOB: the Bureau, those responsible for teaching, research, and outreach, representatives of assistant academic staff (AAP) and special academic staff (BAP), independent academic staff (ZAP), administrative staff (ATP), and students (Master's, alumni, and doctoral students).

The committee's preliminary findings were presented to IOB staff and students at the end of the day. The final findings and recommendations have been incorporated into this report.

The committee would like to thank the chair and management of IOB for the warm welcome and the efficient organisation of the review, as well as all participants for their constructive and open attitude in these discussions.

1. Mission

The management agreement defines IOB's core mission as providing post-graduate education, conducting scientific research, and delivering services on the economic, political, and social aspects of development policy and management, including doctoral theses aimed at obtaining the academic degree of Doctor at a Flemish or foreign university. IOB is required to ensure a demonstrable interaction between these three core tasks.

In the previous visitation and associated audit of IOB (final report delivered in January 2020), it was noted that IOB **consistently strives for excellence as an institution**. The institute was characterised (as in earlier audits) as a **learning organisation**, one that takes (numerous) evaluations and other feedback initiatives seriously—including those arising from internal processes—and demonstrates a real capacity to implement concrete policy and operational adjustments through participative processes. This 'bottom-up' culture reflects a well-established culture of open and decentralised management that has become embedded in the organisation's DNA. According to the 2020 committee report, this approach has *"proven beneficial for the motivation, creativity, and commitment of staff members at all levels"* and has also served as a *"unifying force"* in achieving greater strategic coherence in the overall policy of IOB. According to the 2020 audit, this has enabled IOB to fulfil its threefold mission *"successfully and in an increasingly integrated ('nexus') manner, to the satisfaction of students, the University of Antwerp, partners, and staff members at all levels."*

Looking to the future, the committee formulated several recommendations for the next phase of IOB's institutional lifecycle. Central to these was the concept of **'sustainable growth'** on various levels, urging IOB to address the following priority areas: (i) *'sustainable excellence'* among individual staff members; (ii) refinement of *internal decision-making processes*, particularly concerning priorities; (iii) the institutional *'positioning'* of IOB in a rapidly changing world of international cooperation; and (iv) the implications of all these factors for the identity and DNA of the organisation.

During its visit in June 2024, the committee observed that the **past few years have been quite busy and turbulent** with regard to internal reforms. First, because IOB was fully aware that effective implementation of the *'2021–25 Policy Plan'* brought numerous **new institutional challenges**—highlighted in various evaluations and prioritised in the 2020 audit. Additionally, the overall climate for holding open and productive debates on complex and often ideologically charged topics, such as 'decolonisation,' has increasingly faced constraints—reflected by rising tensions and polarisation. This trend has inevitably affected **IOB's work environment** and has influenced the approach taken to address the necessary reforms around the three core tasks and their interplay.

The self-evaluation report, prepared as part of this audit, indicates that following the lifting of COVID restrictions, IOB made a firm decision to initiate a **broad, internal, overarching consultation known as the "DNA process"**, guided by a dedicated DNA Task Force. Documentary analysis and various consultation rounds during the review clearly showed that this DNA process was grounded in IOB's open and decentralised management culture, conducted inclusively, and provided a necessary *'safe space'* to establish a foundational consensus on specific changes (regarding education, research, and outreach). The **'theory of change' underlying the DNA process** is that *initial* efforts should focus on building a shared understanding around central issues of decolonisation and activism within the organisation. *Once* agreements are reached, these can be transformed into widely supported policy documents addressing the three core functions (education, research, and outreach) and formalised follow-up mechanisms. *Ultimately*, this should also lead, in due course, to a revision of IOB's vision and mission, serving as the culmination of the entire DNA process.

An important lesson IOB has learned in this regard is that, in addition to discussions about abstract concepts such as **'justice'** (a concept included in IOB's vision), it is crucial to focus on the *'how' questions*. An operational perspective offers greater opportunities for reaching agreement and identifying a common ground on which progress can be made. For example, IOB has actively promoted *'multi-perspectivity'* in education and the

principle of ‘*academic pluralism*’—not only in terms of discipline, methodology, or normative ideas about ‘*development*,’ but also in the ways that academics can engage with society.¹

The committee is positive about the ongoing DNA process. While it is not yet complete, it has fostered a positive dynamic within IOB’s three core tasks and strengthened their interconnection. The methods used have been labour-intensive and time-consuming, but they were also inclusive, allowing space for open and sometimes contradictory discussions. The emphasis on operational questions and the commitment to reaching consensus on several concrete change processes have led to tangible results at both policy and institutional levels (which will be further discussed below in the respective sections on IOB operations).

2. Education policy

Previous audits have thoroughly examined all the efforts IOB has made over the past decade concerning the qualitative refinement of the educational offerings and methodologies used. This ongoing investment in the educational segment was driven by the need to align the curriculum with the diverse and evolving expectations of students. An additional and increasingly significant motivator has been the need to reposition and transform IOB as a “*Northern development institute*” in light of the profound changes in the international order and evolving approaches to development thinking and practice.

The committee has observed that **past reforms**—particularly the major curriculum overhaul that resulted in the current three Master’s programmes and associated modules—**continue to add substantial value**. The modular approach, with its various units and subunits, enables IOB to remain adaptable to emerging issues, broaden student choices, and reinforce a ‘*nexus logic*’ (e.g., by linking thematic modules and Master’s dissertations to research work).

Thanks to this modular approach, IOB can also **experiment with innovative methods**. For example, the ‘*action labs*’ have been further expanded and developed. These have shown success, as evidenced by the “*Community-Based Monitoring*” experiment² in Tanzania. This initiative is part of IOB’s “*Mobility Window*,” through which a selected group of IOB students, in collaboration with students from partner universities, can combine theory, action, and reflection on evaluation methods during a field visit and exchange insights with stakeholders from local communities.

The aforementioned DNA process is also highly relevant to the educational component. Like other knowledge institutions and development organisations from the Global North, IOB has had to find ways to incorporate core questions of the **decolonisation agenda** into its educational programmes. The committee has observed that IOB has made **substantial progress** in this area, **thanks to a well-considered strategy, appropriate methodology, gradual implementation, and a willingness to invest in dialogue** with all levels of the organisation to ensure broad support. Naturally, this **process has involved disagreements, tensions, and conflicts**; however, concepts such as ‘diversity’ and ‘multi-perspectivity’ now seem widely accepted as core principles in delivering education. The influence of the decolonisation agenda is reportedly already evident at the programme content level.³ At the same time, the committee believes that IOB should continue to work on further embedding, internalising, and consistently applying these concepts, particularly among individual staff members. There is also a continuous need to anticipate and address potential conflicts, which may arise around sensitive political issues (such as the recent request for a statement on Gaza). Currently, there is no framework or committee in place to provide a balanced advisory on such matters.

The previous audit praised the steps taken to internationalise IOB, particularly through the ‘*IOB Going Global*’ initiative. This contributed to deepening partnerships with Southern educational partners and incorporating content contributions from the Global South into the Master’s programmes. At the same time, the committee

¹ See self-evaluation report IOB, p. 1.

² In the educational segment, IOB opts to implement innovations through “small experiments” that are first tested and can then potentially be scaled up and integrated into institutional policy and practice.

³ As confirmed by the recent Peer Review Education 2023.

at that time cautioned against **overly ambitious goals** regarding institutional support for Southern educational partners or organising 'joint Master's programmes,' viewing IOB as too small for such aims, including in terms of financial resources.

The current committee notes that IOB has heeded this recommendation in the **ICP Connect** process (the successor to IOB Going Global). This project is part of IOB's strategic decision to transition from a Northern organisation to an institute that operates within diversified networks and develops knowledge in a decolonised and co-creative manner. To achieve this, IOB has sought to evolve institutional partners in the South from *"research partners to educational partners"*⁴ through various initiatives.⁵ The above-mentioned DNA process has been utilised to further shape this transformation and better embed IOB's education (and research) in the specific realities and challenges faced by partners in different regional contexts.

Following this approach, IOB has recently invested in **deepening Southern partnerships but with a realistic, selective, and targeted intervention strategies** aligned with IOB's capabilities. A notable example is the evolution of partnerships in Latin America. The long-term collaboration with Nicaragua, which had been facing difficulties for some time⁶, has been embedded within a regional network of institutes in Colombia and Ecuador, with which IOB is working to establish a **'blended' Master's programme**. Current exchanges are already impacting IOB's Master's programmes, enriching them with content and knowledge systems relevant to the region's perspective⁷, which students appreciate as a positive enhancement. Recently, preparations were also launched for an Erasmus Mundus application.

IOB acknowledges that building partnerships in the South is a complex process that requires time and trust, is not linear, and in some cases remains fragile (partly due to limited levels of 'ownership'). Funding for ICP Connect is secured until 2027. In the coming years, IOB intends to further strengthen the network and, with a select group of fully-fledged partners, explore additional funding sources (such as ERASMUS+).

The internationalisation of IOB also occurs through other channels, such as the **alumni network**, which has been further expanded in recent years with the aim of optimally engaging former students in the research-education-social outreach chain (now considered a 'best practice' at the UAntwerp level). Numerous initiatives are launched by IOB to involve alumni in IOB publications with a Southern author and in seminars in the South. Discussions with alumni during the review visit indicated that these efforts are generally appreciated, though participation in specific activities ultimately remains a personal choice for each alumnus.

Another channel further utilised in the past cycle relates to the **internationalisation of UAntwerp**. As before, various staff members serve as lecturers in different Master's programmes at UAntwerp, and there are clear indications of strengthened institutional collaboration (e.g., in the cluster "Broader Subjects, Global Engagement, Global Minds, and joint research initiatives) where IOB maintains a high degree of autonomy.

In terms of delivered outcomes, IOB once again exceeds the expectations set by the management agreement. Over the past five years (2019 to 2023), it has awarded an average of 63 final diplomas annually across its three Master's programmes. As of 1 January 2024, IOB counted 43 PhD students, 41 of whom have an international profile, including 28 from the Global South. Over the past five years, an average of 7.2 new students began their doctoral studies each year, with an average of 3 PhDs successfully completed annually. The dropout rate is limited to two students per year.⁸

The Achilles' heel in IOB education is the **limited interest from European/Belgian students** in the Master's programmes. Their numbers have remained low over the years and are even declining. According to IOB, this

⁴ IOB self-evaluation report 2024.

⁵ For example, the participation of southern teachers increased in master's programs and short training programs such as the 'Community Based Monitoring' in Tanzania and the 'Governance of Natural Resources' in Bukavu.

⁶ The difficulties are mainly related to the political evolutions in the country towards an authoritarian regime that leaves little room for civil society and knowledge institutes.

⁷ These hybrid masters that are being rolled out can also be relevant in the future for other countries in Latin America and regions beyond.

⁸ IOB self-evaluation report, p. 5.

is partly due to competition from other university programmes such as Political Science and Diplomacy, which are perceived to offer better job prospects. The committee realises that IOB cannot directly influence these factors, but it may be worthwhile to further investigate ways to increase enrolment from European/Belgian students. This seems necessary to facilitate the highly valued intercultural dialogues—with adequate representation from the Global North—and also from a financial sustainability perspective (if IOB needs to attract more self-funding students). In its SWOT analysis, IOB acknowledges "*insufficient monitoring of the education environment (e.g., new competition)*" as a significant, longstanding weakness.

3. Research policy

On the research component, the committee notes a **double positive dynamic**.

First, IOB has sought to **further deepen important past reforms** such as the shift in 2013 to looser functional 'research lines' and internal systems. In the same way, the nexus logic also operates on the research approach used, with IOB further experimenting with participatory methods to better embed research in social realities and existing change dynamics (or as one IOB staff member put it, '*outreach is closely related to how you concretely design research, for example around extractive industries or value chains*'). Another example concerns the development of a **PhD programme**, with additional quality control and co-organisation of a basic course for PhD students in Development Studies in the framework of CERES (the Dutch-Flemish Research School for International Development). Participation mechanisms exist to give PhDs a voice in further policy development. IOB recognises the challenge of providing effective support after achieving a PhD for the subsequent career path. Efforts are being made to secure grants from the European Research Council (ERC) and Marie Curie Fellowships for postdoctoral work but this has its limits.

The **DNA process** within IOB was used strategically to **better align the research component with the rapid changes** in the international cooperation landscape, in the very concept of 'development studies' and in the need for multi-, inter- and trans-disciplinarity. In this context, the committee welcomes **the new research policy plan: 'Research and Outreach Strategy 2024-2029'**. The strategy perpetuates the previous alignment to three research lines (within **one research group**) and **introduces relevant innovations in the form of two cross-cutting themes** (closely aligned with the research lines), around the "*Great Lakes of Africa Centre*"⁹ and "*the politics of data and digital development*," respectively. In principle, all this also provides opportunities to better direct recruitment policy in a centralised manner to strengthen the respective research lines and in conformity with IOB's institutional quality standards. The committee also appreciates the way the new strategy places the principle of '*academic pluralism*' at the centre and elaborates it concretely in terms of discipline, methodology or normative ideas on '*development*'.

The new strategy also paves the way for the further development of the policy on **publications with co-authors** from the Global South and for the further '**localisation**' of the staff, especially the ZAP. The committee fully supports the processes initiated, which are yielding promising results, although there is still some way to go.

As in previous audits, the committee found that IOB is a **very performing club in terms of publications in leading journals with high impact factors**. This is confirmed by a recent benchmark study comparing IOB with a number of peer institutes in Europe for the period 2018-2023. On average, an IOB staff member publishes more than 2 Web-of-Science papers per year (which is more than any other institute in our field) and IOB achieves an impact of about 20 citations per year by our scientific peers (which is comparable to a number of top institutes in the UK and the Netherlands).

The committee raised the question of how research priorities are ultimately determined by IOB management in a decentralised culture, with loose and functional research lines and in a context where a significant amount of external funding is brought in. The latter fact is an indicator of the quality of IOB's research work, but it can also weaken IOB's collective profile and create tensions regarding time use of the staff members involved (i.e.

⁹ With opportunities for greater coherence and synergy as this theme brings together around 50% of researchers working in the region.

division of time between teaching, research and consultancy assignments). Attracting external funds is an important element in IOB's overall funding strategy, but management realises that there are limits to growth in this area and a clear connection with its own research priorities must always be sought. In this context, the question arises again to what extent research also has social impact. During the consultation, it appeared that many staff members consider this an important priority. At the same time, IOB's SWOT analysis lists among the weaknesses a risk of '*underinvestment in activities with high societal impact*' and as an opportunity the '*greater focus on societal impact in research assessments*'. According to the committee, this shows that there is still work to be done in this area in IOB's next institutional cycle.

4. Outreach

The committee notes that a lot of progress has been made during the past cycle in bringing the service delivery/outreach component (which used to be somewhat underexposed in the overall functioning of IOB and the nexus logic) up to standard. The committee appreciates the steps taken to better structure and actively support this domain, including the **recruitment of a research and communication coordinator and the development of a 'Communication Commission' (ComCOM)**. This gave the necessary impetus to make the content of the outreach agenda more explicit, including through the elaboration of a **seven possible 'routes'** regarding dissemination of knowledge (internal and external) and social engagement of staff members.¹⁰

The interviews also showed that there is a wide range of perceptions about what outreach means and how to interpret it. That is why it seems a very **pertinent choice to make a 'menu' of options available to the staff** so they can choose for themselves what fits best given their specific interests, competences and visions on social engagement. The committee agrees with IOB's argument that you cannot impose strict and generally applicable outreach obligations on every staff member and that IOB's role should mainly focus on guidance and facilitation (including organising training on how to do outreach).

Only then the question arises from the committee's perspective of how, as an IOB, you can minimally manage and especially monitor how the outreach process is going on throughout the institute and especially whether concrete results are being achieved. This is all the more important given that these are difficult times for international solidarity, polarisation is increasing while public support for development cooperation may be eroding. IOB's knowledge, expertise and voice should be heard in these processes. Internally, this can be organised in an open and differentiated way, but externally, IOB as an institute needs to be able to demonstrate that the various forms of societal engagement have an identifiable impact on public debates and societal processes around international cooperation and the place of knowledge institutes therein.

5. Collaboration within and outside Flanders

As touched upon above, much is moving in the realm of **southern partnerships** at IOB-which have been part of the organisation's DNA for decades. The committee commends efforts in recent years to optimise the nature and added value of partnerships with clear strategic goals in mind: (i) strengthening the **legitimacy** of IOB as a development institute from the North; (ii) **enriching the content** of the existing masters with a more systematic and structured input of the knowledge and expertise on behalf of southern partners in teaching, research and outreach; (iii) **diversifying** the partnerships (beyond the legacies of the past); (iv) refining **learning methodologies**, e.g. through north-south exchanges and new opportunities for student mobility (e.g. field visits and 'action research with local partners'); (v) exploring opportunities to organise **joint masters** with strong regional anchoring.

According to the committee, these are valuable processes that are already producing visible results and deserve further deepening in the future. Two caveats are raised, however. First, the committee is concerned

¹⁰ These include respectively: (i) participation in the public debate; (ii) external expertise to specialised development institutions; (iii) embedded expertise at specialised development institutions ; (iv) visibility IOB contributions; (v) academic south cooperation with South partners; (vi) cooperation with UAntwerp and (vii) establishment and/or active involvement in development 'spin-offs'.

about the overall workload and mobilisation of expertise within IOB that good management of these expanding partnerships inevitably entails. This risk is exacerbated by the '*strained political context*' in Central Africa and Central America¹¹ which may negatively affect the evolution of the partnerships and will require additional strategic commitment and flexible support from IOB. The second comment concerns the uncertainty about the availability of the necessary sustainable funding to continue the momentum and experimentation around Southern partnerships (post ICP Connect funding).

IOB's **North operations** remains a less thought out and elaborated policy area in this cycle as well. IOB staff members participate in a variety of networks and institutional relationships have been established with specialised organisations that can help improve the quality of IOB masters (such as CERES). The self-assessment report also mentions several stable or changing collaborations with all kinds of institutions in the North.¹² In itself relevant activities, but it is difficult to detect a clear intervention strategy in the North operation, underpinned by concrete objectives and expected results (e.g. in terms of branding or outreach). In the same logic, the consultation expressed the hope that IOB would '*put more effort into Europe itself*' through strategic positioning and networking (with researchers, with potential students, etc.).

6. Student management

Successive audits give high scores to the way IOB has developed and refined student management into an optimised system with clear processes, procedures and with a competent and dedicated group of support staff. Also during the current visitation, feedback from students was very positive about the general atmosphere in IOB, the quality of reception and the numerous initiatives taken to properly frame and guide students. There is also plenty of room to make their own choices in a diversified and flexible range of masters and modules. **Students particularly appreciate the way IOB functions as a '*melting pot*' with '*open space*'** for diverse views and discussions that are respectful of intercultural differences. Regarding decolonisation, it was argued that IOB has overall managed this process well within the organisation, as evidenced by, among other things, the clear choice to include diverse perspectives in the curriculum. Others feel that the whole decolonisation debate is something that mainly stirs minds in the North and spurs action-less so in the Global South.

However, **comments** were made by students regarding '*too much focus on Africa*' and the predominance of lecturers with an '*academic background*' over those with a more '*practice-oriented approach*'-who are supposed to be able to provide more solution-oriented teaching.¹³ In the same vein, some called for '*more time for interactions*'. In addition, an old pain emerged during the audit, i.e. the widespread perception among students that the duration of the masters (1 year) is too short. This causes the overall package to be perceived as '*too compressed*' and '*too intense*'. This can weigh on the overall quality of masters and on the mental health of some students. IOB is aware of these issues and has been looking for ways to reduce the pressure, but these are obviously limited by the structural fact of the duration of master's degrees.

7. Staff management

The previous audit concluded that **all the necessary internal systems and processes for modern and efficient human resources management are formally in place and functioning**¹⁴-also to the satisfaction of staff.¹⁵ Rather, the problem was seen in the *informal* culture of IOB, characterised by high levels of commitment, drive and ambition, which can carry a real risk of burnout. To address this, IOB then advanced the concept of '*sustainable excellence*' as a target for the following years.

¹¹ See SWOT-analysis of IOB in self-evaluation report.

¹² Self-evaluation report, p. 16.

¹³ An expectation mainly held by students who have already gained work experience before starting the Masters.

¹⁴ In IOB's SWOT analysis, '*comprehensive staff policies and procedures, including clear publication and outreach criteria and a structured goal-setting cycle*' is considered an acquired strength (see self-assessment report).

¹⁵ In the SWOT analysis, a '*stimulating and supportive work environment*' is also considered an acquired strength of IOB.

The committee notes that IOB creatively sought solutions and initiated a policy to promote the *‘workability of individual assignments for IOB staff’* from an institutional logic that values quality over quantity. To this end, adjusted individual evaluation criteria for teaching, research and outreach were recently introduced and it is now also possible to propose a temporary reduction in assignment. As a matter of principle, space was also created for ‘mini-sabbaticals’ and IOB is open to further adjustments to the AAP policy that will help keep the workload manageable. Also of interest is the collaboration with Mensura to identify and, where necessary, improve well-being at work.¹⁶

These are all laudable processes that should be further tested and deepened in the future. However, the committee is concerned that this exercise will also run into limits related, among other things, to the relative smallness of the institute. This offers advantages in terms of agility and innovation, but it also inevitably leads to the multiplication of tasks that ultimately have to be carried out by a limited group of staff members. This dilemma was well summarised by an IOB staff member: *“by being very active, we can play above our weight”* in the broad framework of UAntwerp. But this can and will continue to clash with the endeavour to achieve sustainable excellence. This is also recognised in IOB’s risk analysis. In particular, reference is made to *“the risk of unsustainable workloads due to self-imposed performance targets and new demands”*¹⁷ as well as to the strongly enforced *“results-oriented management”* with its numerous evaluation criteria and competitive pressure *from the university and the wider academic world*. As found in previous audits, this can lead to situations where staff incentives are too focused on individual rather than institutional agendas- which can create management problems for securing public tasks.

Furthermore, the committee raises the question of whether the priced “bottom-up” culture is always good and whether, in some areas, there could be more efficiency-based and delegated leadership (where elected managers have mandate to decide on more issues). This should be an area of focus for IOB, partly to avoid staff members becoming disinclined to apply for onerous management positions that require hard work with the constant risk of becoming the scapegoat.

8. Quality assurance, management and policy

There is a **long tradition** of institution-building within IOB to establish efficient internal processes for quality assurance, management and policy. These investments, spread over time, have resulted in a strong, consolidated and controlled system- as recognised by successive audits. The existence of this institutional infrastructure and culture within the organisation, according to the committee, largely explains why IOB has been able to launch the DNA process with vision and methodology to find concrete answers around a new wave of institutional challenges arising from adjusted strategic frameworks and evolutions in the international development landscape.

The committee was impressed by the way this process was conducted. Strong points were the choice of a ‘bottom-up’ logic, respecting the principle of grassroots democracy specific to IOB. The sights were set on gradual and achievable results that could eventually bring about the expected changes. During the consultations, it was clearly pointed out by managerial staff that the process is not complete. In the next cycle, management will have to **give priority to analysing the results achieved** and, on that basis, continue with the effective implementation of what has been agreed (such as Team Charter, the concrete application of principles such as *‘multi-perspectivity’* and *‘academic pluralism’*, the use of the different *‘pathways’* on outreach and the on sustainable excellence).

The committee is aware that this process will take time and additional energy from management. IOB management has demonstrated its ability to handle “change management” processes, but the committee wonders to what extent there will be **sufficient space and capacity to follow up, further shape and monitor the various dimensions of the DNA process.**

¹⁶ See self-assessment report, p. 2.

¹⁷ See SWOT analysis.

This applies in particular to the **external dimensions** of the DNA process (beyond internal adjustments towards staff and ways of working in teaching, research and outreach). These external challenges include questions such as the implications for relations with southern partners, the increasing need *'to mainstream development issues'*¹⁸ (i.e. what role for IOB?) and the consequences of a polarised political context for international solidarity and the place and role of knowledge institutions.

9. Financial management

As was the case in previous audits, the committee notes that IOB has **well-functioning systems and processes on financial management**. An **upward trend** in attracting **external funding** from various sources can also be noted in this cycle. Furthermore, IOB systematically strives to use the available resources strategically. This applies in particular to innovative experiments, such as the aforementioned hybrid/blended master's with regional partners from Central and Latin America, which is provided in parallel online and with local partners (in addition to the regular programmes). This process is funded through IPC Connect until 2027. The sustainability of the experiment is therefore not guaranteed, but one possible slope is that this regional master's (and other joint initiatives) will eventually generate sufficient revenue to continue the momentum. It should also be reiterated that the gradual development of the IPC into a stable, professional, learning and well-governed organisation offering clear added value and *'value for money'* was made possible in particular by the **availability of predictable institutional funding**.

Apart from the well-functioning financial management system, the committee believes that there are a number of **key challenges** for IOB **on future funding** at various levels and which have to do with:

- The high (short-term) dependence on competitive and time-limited scholarships. The self-assessment discusses in detail the uncertainty surrounding the future of the VLIR-UOS scholarships (now a package of 30 scholarships for the three masters). This package still guarantees a sufficient number of students from low-income countries for the next two years. IOB is exploring alternatives, but eliminating the scholarship students would remove an *'essential piece of DNA'* from the masters.¹⁹
- The uncertainty surrounding a renewal of funding for the **internationalisation process in the South** at the end of the ICP Connect project;
- The volatile political context in Europe with increasing polarisation, populism and far-right politics, which can erode **support for international solidarity** and lead to structural cuts in the budgets for international cooperation at home and in Flanders. Given IOB's high continuity in performance, its embedding in UAntwerp and the credibility the institute has managed to build among policymakers, there is a perspective that institutional funding will be maintained in the coming years. But according to the committee, it seems useful for IOB management to prepare *"for possible bad times ahead"* by drawing up different scenarios and exit strategies..

10. CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

As in previous visitations, the committee is impressed by the **many assets** IOB has managed to build and consolidate over time. The institute has **consolidated and well-functioning internal systems and processes** (on policy, management, quality assurance, personnel and financial management). It is a **learning organisation**, constantly critically reviewing its own operations at various levels and making refinements where necessary. IOB is also open to recommendations from evaluations and other feedback initiatives and takes systematic action to work on them. This is also communicated openly, including around challenges in implementation or areas where little progress has been made. The self-evaluation and accompanying SWOT analysis attest to this capacity for self-reflection and open/transparent reporting.

¹⁸ See IOB SWOT analysis.

¹⁹ Self-evaluation report, p. 33.

IOB has also been able to develop a **decentralised management culture** that allows reforms and innovations in policy and praxis to be designed and implemented in an inclusive manner with support to ensure sustainability. Thus, the committee was able to establish that several structural reforms in teaching and research, established years ago, are still bringing great added value and are appreciated by staff and students (such as the 'nexus logic', the three masters and modular approach or the evolution towards looser, functional lines of research). The same inclusive and gradual approach-aimed at building support for institutional and individual changes- can also be seen regarding the 'Outreach' component. In the past cycle, IOB has made a lot of progress in this respect, in particular by making explicit various possible forms of social engagement and further developing the institutional framework of this assignment, which is gaining in importance in times of polarisation and threatened support for international solidarity. Building on the recommendations of the previous review, IOB has also taken important steps to optimise the potential added value of Southern partnerships in an innovative, strategic and realistic way. The process is already bearing fruit (e.g. on increased legitimacy of IOB as a 'Northern' institute, input from Southern content and methodologies) but also confronts the institute with important challenges (political context in certain regions, limited ownership by partners, sustainable funding). Another asset of IOB is the **high dedication and active commitment of staff members at all levels**. This not only ensures good supervision and guidance of students, but is also translated into impressive achievements in terms of delivery of final degrees and PhDs and publications in leading journals.

As a result of those assets, consolidated processes and capacity to adapt, the Institute manages to carry out its **three-pronged mission globally in a convincing and increasingly integrated manner** -to the satisfaction of students, alumni, UAntwerp, partners and staff members.

In the past cycle, IOB has also worked to '**reposition**' the institute in a rapidly evolving landscape for international cooperation-further fuelled by the 'decolonisation agenda' that took an increasingly central place in the public debate. The committee lauds the way IOB sought to make that transformation through an inclusive 'DNA process', which was quite labour-intensive and accompanied by the necessary tensions and conflicts. Building on the existing IOB culture of grassroots democracy and 'bottom-up' consultation, the process has yielded a first set of important results, including a Team Charter and broad acceptance of concepts such as 'multi-perspectivity' and 'academic pluralism' in teaching, research and outreach. **The process is not complete but the foundations have been laid** to further transform IOB into an institution that operates in diversified networks and develops knowledge and provides education in a decolonised manner, through co-creation.

Looking ahead, this last section focuses on the **most important construction sites for IOB in the coming years** according to the committee:

1) Limits to inclusive approach and decentralised management. The committee fully endorses the usefulness and added value of the established IOB culture of participation, consultation and decentralised management. It is an asset that should be cherished. At the same time- and in line with the previous audit- the committee believes that IOB can go further in **determining the limits of grassroots democracy and decentralisation**, which in certain cases can also be a *liability*. This could be beneficial for setting priorities, strategically managing external funding flows or better managing outreach activities.

2) Effective implementation of the DNA process. In the past cycle, a whole series of positive dynamics were set in motion in terms of repositioning/transformation of IOB. These now need to be further specified- with **strategic monitoring of results achieved** in (i) the application of principles such as multi-perspectivity and academic pluralism at institutional and individual level; (ii) anticipating and managing tensions and conflicts around decolonization and activism; (iii) ambitions regarding southern partnerships and their impact on education and research; (iv) the practical application of the various forms of outreach and their impact; (v) a possible increased investment in activities with "*high societal impact*."

3) Diversification of networks. This process is underway in southern partnerships, but much less visible and strategic in the **northern operations and in the European context**. It is recommended to also deepen this part of the global IOB approach to networking. This could also contribute to attracting more European students.

4) Sustainable growth. This was already a construction site in the past cycle and a lot of commendable work was done in this area. But the process is not finished and IOB will have to continue to look for ways to keep the workload manageable, taking into account all kinds of forces and (dis)incentives within IOB and in the broader framework of UAntwerp. The workload and the related problem of **mental health among students** also deserve further attention. In the context of sustainable growth, it also seems useful for IOB to invest extra in the search for solutions to **important challenges regarding the financing** of scholarships and the internationalisation process. Given the increasing polarization and the possible erosion of support for international solidarity, it also seems appropriate to *“prepare for possible bad times”* in terms of institutional financing. Or, as someone put it: *“we will have to earn our societal license in the future.”*

5) IOB and the future of international solidarity and knowledge institutes. Building on the good work that IOB is already doing in this regard, it would be useful if IOB were to act **even more “in the front line” of the political/public debate on international solidarity** and the *mainstreaming* of development in times when the *underlying current* of our European and Belgian society in this regard is evolving in a less favourable direction.